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Decolonization and the aesthetics of disorder: Naipaul, Evaristo, Boland

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Abstract

Decolonization is presented in dominant accounts as an orderly transition and not the culmination of anticolonial resistance movements. This in turn contributes to what Paul Gilroy terms an endemic “post-imperial melancholia” across contemporary European nations and the removal of empire and its demise from understandings of European history. Drawing on Bill Schwarz’s reconceptualization of a Fanonian commitment to disorder, this article focuses on Britain’s history of colonialism and post-imperial immigration and argues for the mapping of a disorderly aesthetics in works by V. S. Naipaul, Bernardine Evaristo, and Eavan Boland. The three formal features of non-linearity, polyvocality, and environmental imagery enable these writers to bear witness to the complex histories of empire, transatlantic slavery, decolonization, and immigration from the colonial “margins”. These “aesthetics of disorder” counter a dominant narrative of decolonial order and challenge conceptions of British exceptionalism that were reinforced at the moment of imperial decline.

Keywords

Kamau Brathwaite, Eavan Boland, decolonization, Bernardine Evaristo, Paul Gilroy, V. S. Naipaul, post-imperial melancholia, Bill Schwarz, tidalectics, transatlantic slavery

When Bristol’s statue of the slave-trader Edward Colston was toppled by Black Lives Matter protesters in June 2020, the UK’s Home Secretary, Priti Patel, called it an “act of public disorder” that she claimed was “a distraction from the cause in which people are actually protesting” (Gogarty, 2020). She went on to say that “sheer vandalism and disorder completely is unacceptable [*sic*]” and called on the police to ensure that “those individuals responsible for such disorderly and lawless behaviour” are brought to justice. This interjection by a government minister is a timely reminder that the language of order and disorder has long been integral to British narratives of decolonization. In 1961,

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Clement Atlee claimed in his speech *Empire Into Commonwealth* that Britain's global hegemony was coming to an end "voluntarily" and "without external pressure or weariness at the burden of ruling".¹ This language persists today in the Home Office's 2018 citizenship booklet *Life in the United Kingdom: A Guide for New Residents*, which describes decolonization as "an orderly transition from Empire to Commonwealth, with countries being granted their independence".¹ In these "official" accounts of the end of empire, the moment when colonies gained their hard-won freedoms is *not* seen as a victory for anticolonial resistance but as the final triumph of British colonial order. These examples enunciate a dominant narrative of British exceptionalism that disregards the multiple instances of resistance that were met with British colonial force, examples of which include the Amritsar massacre in India (1919), the Irish War of Independence (1919–1921), the Malayan state of emergency (1948–1960), the Mau Mau rebellion in Kenya (1952–1960), and the Suez crisis in Egypt (1956–1957).

Accounts of decolonization as an orderly transition work to place the Empire and its demise firmly in the past as a socio-economic process that was successfully managed by the British state. Yet the felling of the Colston statue — as well as other movements that have brought down the statues of King Leopold II in Belgium and Cecil Rhodes in South Africa — can be seen as part of the long and unfinished process of decolonization. In this context, decolonization and disorderliness go hand in hand. It is worth noting, for instance, that the Rhodes Must Fall movement began and gained international momentum only after Chumani Maxwele, a student of the University of Cape Town, threw a bucket of human faeces collected from a nearby township over the statue of Rhodes that once sat on the university campus. These contemporary forms of decolonial praxis remind us of Frantz Fanon's influential assertion in *The Wretched of the Earth* that "[d]ecolonization, which sets out to change the order of the world, is, obviously, a programme of complete disorder. But it cannot come as a result of magical practices, nor of a natural shock, nor of a friendly understanding" (Fanon, 1965/2001: 27). For a truly revolutionary break to be acquired from imperial oppression, Fanon writes, colonized peoples cannot rely upon diplomacy and the consent of the imperial powers; self-determination must meet the violent force of colonial rule head on.

In his introduction to the collection *End of Empire and the English Novel Since 1945*, the cultural historian Bill Schwarz takes up Fanon's insistence on the necessary deployment of disorder. He argues that "[t]o understand decolonisation as a process of *disorder* is helpful, particularly in overcoming the residues of the mythic screen of British decolonisation as a history which was, providentially, conducted in good order" (Schwarz, 2011: 10; emphasis in original). Schwarz persuasively asserts that the mythologizing of decolonization not only disregards the violent history of anticolonial struggle throughout colonized regions, but that it serves "to take decolonisation out of history, and to insulate the home population from the historical realities of what had occurred" (6). This assessment highlights how the myth of "good order" has compartmentalized Britain's colonial past, detaching the history of empire and decolonization from their legacies in the present. Paul Gilroy has noted the ways in which this myth operates across different forms of British culture, ultimately generating a prevailing "post-imperial melancholia". The football chant "Two World Wars and One World Cup", for instance, reveals that

Britain's brave but confused affiliates prefer an ordered past in which they were exploited and pauperised, but nonetheless knew who they were, to a chronically chaotic present in which even those limited certainties have been stripped away by the new corporate mandate of interminable, regressive change. (Gilroy, 2004: 120)

The interplay between a myth of ordered British exceptionalism and the active forgetting of Britain's brutal colonial history is brought to light in the fact that the chant's melody is based on "Camptown Races", a minstrel song from 1850 whose lyrics mock the speech patterns of African Americans. What this reveals is that there exists a paradox at the heart of the chant: its modern conception on the terraces elides the violent and complex history of colonialism, slavery, and genocide whilst at the same time retaining that history as a spectral presence in the song's melody. The words offer a pithily triumphalist account of twentieth-century British history that is rendered as distinctly English, while the melody points towards a much longer and more complex transatlantic, colonial history that triangulates Britain, Africa, and the Americas.

According to Gilroy, British colonialism has been taken out of history due to an "inability even to face, never mind actually mourn, the profound change in circumstances and moods that followed the end of the empire and consequent loss of imperial prestige" (98). This loss and subsequent elision of empire from national understandings of British identity and history has created a sense of grief that is unidentified and so remains unexplored. "Once the history of the empire became a source of discomfort, shame, and perplexity", writes Gilroy, "its complexities and ambiguities were readily set aside. Rather than work through those feelings, that unsettling history was diminished, denied, and then, if possible, actively forgotten" (98). To combat this active forgetting, Schwarz calls for "a 'disorderly' conception of history" which

belongs to no-one: in that lies its disorderliness. To employ such a term is not to suppose that the past cannot be reached, or that it is un-narratable, or that it needs to be jettisoned. On the contrary, it may be exactly from such an idea of historical time that we can best understand England after empire. (2011: 26)

It is a provocation that deserves exploration as it suggests just one means by which the work of postcolonial literature, cultural analysis, and historiography can combat Britain's post-imperial melancholia. Where both Schwarz and Gilroy pay close attention to "the political and emotional landscape of England after Empire" as a means of "comprehend[ing] the domestic and racial configurations of decolonisation" (Schwarz, 2011: 21), I argue for the mapping of a set of aesthetic qualities across texts that foreground the intertwined histories of Britain and the colonial "margins". These qualities allow for a challenge to the rhetorical recentring of the imperial metropole at the very historical moment of its demise. In place of the authoritative triumphalism of the British state, a disorderly conception of colonial history across the Americas, West Africa, and Ireland can bear witness to formerly marginalized perspectives, particularly of women and people of colour.

In order to explore what I am calling an aesthetics of disorder, I will consider three writers whose work addresses British colonialism, transatlantic slavery, and decolonization at the "margins": V. S. Naipaul, whose 1967 novel *The Mimic Men* dramatizes the end of empire in the Caribbean and attends to the legacies of chattel slavery in the region;

Bernardine Evaristo, whose novel-in-verse *Lara* from 1997 (updated and reissued in 2009) historicizes post-imperial Britain in relation to the slave trade, colonialism in Africa, and immigration to Britain from Africa and Ireland; and, finally, Eavan Boland, whose poetry confronts the overlapping histories of colonialism in Ireland, Africa, and the Caribbean, and who writes women into a history of Irish nationalism. A comparative analysis reveals three shared aesthetic features. Firstly, Naipaul and Evaristo use fragmented and non-linear narratives. In doing so, *The Mimic Men* and *Lara* disrupt the ways in which the literary forms of the memoir and the Bildungsroman respectively impose a chronological order onto complex and traumatic histories. Secondly, Evaristo and Boland adopt polyvocal strategies that disrupt the notion of a singular, authoritative account of history. And thirdly, the environmental imagery of trees and water that occurs in works by all three writers allows for an exploration of counter-colonial accounts of time and space: where British colonial expansion was predicated on notions of historical progress and terra/aqua nullius, Naipaul, Evaristo, and Boland recover the deep time of colonial violence that has been disregarded in dominant narratives of decolonial order.

“Absurd disorder”: V. S. Naipaul’s *The Mimic Men*

The Mimic Men is set mostly on the fictional Caribbean island of Isabella, which is loosely based on Naipaul’s home country of Trinidad. Through Ralph Singh’s narration, the novel offers a dramatization of the new social and political formations in the Caribbean, whereby anticolonial parties sought to bind disparate racial, ethnic, and class groups together under the unitary and democratic principle of the nation-state. Rather than investing in the value of what Fanon terms “the moving consciousness of the whole of the people” (1965/2001: 165), however, Naipaul depicts former Caribbean colonies as sites of “absurd disorder” (1967/2002: 166) where national coherence is impossible. In speaking of the political and social structures that emerged on Isabella after independence, for example, Singh asserts that “[w]e were a haphazard, disordered and mixed society” (57). Due to the history of transatlantic slavery, the Caribbean is depicted in the novel as having been forged out of exploitation and resource extraction before being left “shipwrecked and lost” (177) by European colonists. It is for this reason that I begin with *The Mimic Men* as it shows the internalization by Naipaul of a colonial dichotomy whereby colonized societies “lack order” (6) and socio-political order resides only in Europe (Naipaul, 1967/2002).

Singh’s pronouncements about the inherent chaos at the heart of Isabella ventriloquize Naipaul’s own belief in the colonialist opposition between European social order and the disorderliness of colonized regions, thus contributing to the author contentious reputation in Caribbean and postcolonial literary studies. In his travelogue *The Middle Passage*, Naipaul recounts his journey back to Trinidad after a period of study in England, infamously writing, “The history of the islands can never be told satisfactorily (Naipaul, 1963/1995). Brutality is not the only difficulty. History is built around achievement and creation; and nothing was created in the West Indies” (1963/1995: 29). As Rob Nixon notes, it is in assertions such as this that Naipaul

distinguishes between the past and history: the former is simple and associated with “primitive” or “half-made” societies; the latter is complex and a prerogative of the West. He reviles the past

because he associates it with the regressive myths and fantasies that “tribal” societies fabricate about themselves. The possession of history on the other hand, is a precondition for and product of human achievement. (1997: 119)

For Naipaul, culture, civilization, and history are seen as thriving in Europe, while the islands of the Caribbean, as Singh states, have been “set adrift yet not altogether abandoned” (1967/2002: 209). Postcolonial Caribbean nations are regarded as being governed by leaders whose mimicry of European political theory only approximates to “heady speeches and token deportations”, and thus “a continuing order” masks the “chaos” within (209). As John Brannigan has noted, in *The Mimic Men* “politics are games and dramas which rehearse but never achieve solutions to the problems left in the wake of colonialism” (2002: 179). Anglicized Indo-Caribbean men such as Naipaul and Singh are fated to fall between the two poles of Europe and the Caribbean, permanently attached to both but belonging to neither. Yet, it is in the disrupted form of the fictionalized, non-linear memoir and the use of environmental imagery that Naipaul also signals a much more ambivalent response to this colonial dichotomy. These two aesthetic qualities work to emphasize Naipaul’s depiction of historical trauma whereby the delimiting binaries of racial identity inaugurated by European colonialism and the brutal history of transatlantic slavery intrude belatedly on the Caribbean’s postcolonial present.

The memoir form carries with it the expectation of realist referentiality and chronological representation. As G. Thomas Couser maintains, it is a form that “presents itself, and is therefore read, as a nonfictional record or re-presentation of actual humans’ experience” (2012: 15). Naipaul presents Singh as choosing the memoir form because it ostensibly provides the means by which he can make sense of the “absurd disorder” and overriding sense of “placelessness” that has permeated his entire life: “It was unease of just this sort”, he writes, “which came to me when I began this book” (1967/2002: 166). Singh explains that his “first instinct was towards the writing of history” (85). This instinct is dismissed as it presented the “vision of a disorder that was beyond any one man to control”, leading him instead to “this story, this language, *this form*” (85; emphasis added). Sanjay Krishnan, in comparing *The Mimic Men* to *The Enigma of Arrival* (1987), reads the former as adhering to the traditional characteristics of the memoir, arguing that it unfolds in a “linear and realist manner” that denotes Naipaul’s commitment in his early works to “directness and clarity” as a means of depicting the postcolonial “historical condition” (2013: 610). Yet, there is an identifiable ironic distance between Singh’s desire for narrative order in his memoir and the fictional novel that Naipaul produces. Rather than imitating the traditional characteristics of the memoir, Naipaul adopts a non-linear form that contains reflections and divergences within each discrete part as Singh crosses and recrosses the Atlantic Ocean: Part One tells of Singh’s university years in London and his return home with a white English wife; Part Two recounts his childhood and adolescence before jumping ahead to his rise to political prominence in adulthood and his divorce; and Part Three tells of his eventual exile after independence, which leads him back to England and a hotel on the margins of London where he writes his life story in a state of permanent impermanence. What emerges, then, is a conflict between Singh’s belief that “writing, for all its initial distortion, clarifies” (1967/2002: 274) and the final form of the novel as a disrupted, non-consecutive

memoir. By the novel's close, Naipaul presents Singh as having failed in his attempt to impose order onto the chaos of his life because he is caught between two ontological and geographical poles and is unable to ever really find a sense of belonging in either.

The conflicted sense of affinity with and dislocation from both Britain and the Caribbean that fragments Singh's memoir is compounded by a traumatic history of chattel slavery and geographical violence. It is in Naipaul's use of environmental imagery that *The Mimic Men* alludes to the way in which Singh's notion of order and modern progress is predicated on the destruction of a complex past of colonization and the exploitation of racialized labour. One of the central images Naipaul adopts is that of a tree stump that must be removed to allow for the building of Singh's housing development. After inheriting a derelict citrus plantation that his grandfather had bought and let go to waste, Singh foresees the post-war expansion of Isabella's capital city and decides to turn it into a suburb for the country's newly independent middle class. He recounts:

I remember a trifling incident; it occurred almost at the beginning. The men were landscaping. In the afternoon the foreman told me that they had run into the stump and roots of a giant tree; three charges of dynamite had been necessary to get rid of it. He showed me the crater: a monstrous wound in the red earth. A giant tree, old perhaps when Columbus came: I would like to have seen it, I would have liked to have preserved it. I kept a piece of the wood on my desk, for the interest, as a reminder of violation, a talisman. (63)

Singh's response suggests that his cynical modernization of Isabella's landscape for profit is disturbed by the presence of the tree; it is thus a moment that indicates Naipaul's impulse to hold up for questioning his own investment in a colonial dichotomy of order and disorder. Singh initially dismisses the tree's removal as no more than a "trifling" matter, and yet he retains a piece of the wood as "a reminder of violation". The tree acts as a reminder of the island's deep time, connecting the postcolonial moment with the invasion of the Americas by Columbus, the genocide of indigenous Carib and Arawak peoples, the inauguration of transatlantic chattel slavery, and the spread of plantation economies. Despite being a mere stump, the tree is freighted with this centuries-old history in direct contrast with Singh's modern housing development, which will benefit only what Fanon terms the "national bourgeoisie" (1965/2001: 122) of the newly independent postcolony. The new development, Singh affirms, complements "the smartness of the old" (Naipaul, 1967/2002: 63): in the housing developments alone, the past and the present support each other because they have been emptied of all meaning beyond mere fetishism. The tree is the only barrier to this, and the fact that it leaves a "monstrous wound" in the landscape highlights the stubborn refusal of the traumatic history of genocide and slavery to be subsumed as part of a superficial vision of modernity.²

The symbol of a tree with deep, expansive roots is central to Bernardine Evaristo's novel-in-verse *Lara*. Where *The Mimic Men* depicts the destruction of this symbol of colonial deep time, however, the protagonist of *Lara* carefully reconstructs a family tree that maps out a polycultural and intercontinental web of connections formed through centuries of colonization, slavery, and migration across Europe, Africa, and the Americas since the sixteenth century.

“Unruly rhythms”: Bernardine Evaristo’s *Lara*

The family tree that accompanies Evaristo’s *Lara* combines the histories of West Africa, Brazil, Germany, England, and Ireland, encompassing the transatlantic slave trade, the Irish Famine, and migration to Britain. Evaristo’s choice to structure the novel around a family tree serves to remind us that the family unit — so prized by conservative discourse as the stable core of an orderly society — is by its very nature chaotic and incomplete. We discover for instance that as a child Lara knew very little about her father Taiwo’s family history. This is due to the trauma caused by the death of both Taiwo’s twin sister and his mother, alongside the racism of his mother-in-law at home and the National Front on London’s streets. Taiwo refuses to talk about his own family history and says that he must “erase” (Evaristo, 2009: 112) the memory of his sister and mother so that he can live.

Lara pieces together the various fragments of her family tree, taking the reader from suburban London to Nigeria, Brazil, and Ireland. This affirms that Britain is a hybrid and heterogeneous nation that has been forged out of a long history of slavery, colonialism, and immigration, stretching back before the end of the Second World War, decolonization, and the arrival of the SS *Empire Windrush*. As John McLeod has argued, *Lara* shows us that

[t]he social and political future of the British isles rests upon the ability of its conflicted population to reconceive of Britain’s past and present in transcultural terms, recognizing and prizing the unruly rhythms of arrival, settlement and departure which London particularly, but not exclusively, exemplifies. (2004: 178)

The active piecing together of an unruly familial and transnational history is replicated in the aesthetics of the novel. Where *The Mimic Men* is a non-linear memoir, *Lara* is an example of what Mark Stein has identified as the Black British Bildungsroman, whereby “subject formation under the influence of political, social, educational, familial, and other forces” (2004: xiii) is central to the narrative structure. Evaristo adopts and adapts this literary form, which is freighted with codifying a bourgeois social order, as a means of telling the story of Lara’s formation through adolescence and into adulthood. This is done in a fragmented and polyphonic way that merges third- and first-person perspectives, locations, and time periods. Lara is our protagonist and primary voyager on this journey, a role that is emphasized by the allusion to Dante in the naming of Lara’s cousin Beatrice, which recalls *The Divine Comedy* and the *Inferno* where Beatrice represents revelation and appears as a guide to the afterlife. Evaristo’s Beatrice inspires Lara to begin her own journey of self-discovery by telling her to learn “some African ways” (2009: 130) because although she may reject the delimiting binaries of race, white society will only ever see her as black. At the same time, however, Evaristo decentres Lara’s viewpoint and reimagines the voices of her ancestors so that this history belongs to no one individual character. As Vedrana Veličković argues, rather than resolving the inherent messiness of this intercontinental family history, *Lara* evinces a “productive tension” that arrives at “a melancholic obligation to resist neat resolutions of (un)belonging as being simply about the protagonists’ identity negotiation” (2012: 67). The family history

remains narratable by embracing — rather than smoothing out — the complexities and partiality of familial and transnational histories. To bear witness to this intertwined and unruly ancestral history in an orderly, chronological way would be to simplify its complexities and would make it too easy to compartmentalize as existing only in the distant past, or to take out of history altogether.

As with Naipaul's text, the disorderly deep time of colonization and slavery is emphasized through the text's environmental imagery. Yet, there is a fundamental difference in the deployment of this imagery. In *The Mimic Men* the tree is a fixed and obtrusive entity that must be destroyed to allow Singh to continue his middle-class, landowning life. This foregrounds how a concern with land relates to Naipaul's emphasis on the landmasses of Europe and the Caribbean between which Singh falls as he feels he belongs to neither. In this worldview, the Atlantic Ocean is a body of water that represents a blank space between two geographical and ontological poles. In *Lara*, by contrast, water acts as "the central complex trope of the novel's revisioning of history" (McLeod, 2004: 187), enabling the protagonist to become connected imaginatively to an intercontinental and intergenerational web of life. This emphasis is indicated by the novel's epigraph, the Yoruba proverb, "However far the stream flows, it never forgets its source". It is also evident in Lara's full name: Omilara in Yoruba means "the family are like water" (Evaristo, 2009: 98), while the family surname, Da Costa, means "from the coast" in Portuguese. In an interview, Evaristo affirms how "the water imagery [...] began to evolve unconsciously and then I realized that was what was happening, so then I began to exploit it" (Munoz Valdivieso and Evaristo, 2004: 16). Ultimately, the fluidity and tidal movement of water offers Evaristo a set of aesthetic choices that enable her to further accommodate a disorderly conception of history.

The spanning of continents and centuries is presented in a formal structure that eschews linear progression and instead generates a temporality that moves forwards and backwards in time. In this way, Evaristo enacts Kamau Brathwaite's concept of "tidalectics", which moves away from a Hegelian, dialectical model involving an "ordered [...] contest of thesis and antithesis resulting in historical synthesis" (Ashcroft, 2016: 101). In place of a universalized Hegelian progress, Brathwaite sees Caribbean history as "like the movement of the ocean [...], coming from one continent/continuum, touching another, and then receding ('reading') from the island(s) into perhaps the creative chaos of the(ir) future" (1999: 34). This creative chaos, writes Brathwaite, is able to "connect broken islands, cracked, broken words, worlds, friendships, ancestories" (1994: 653). The word "connect" is instructive here: neither Brathwaite nor Evaristo seek to mend the fragmented ancestral histories that span Africa and the Americas as to do so would impose a superficial order onto a disorderly past and privilege a single, authoritative vision of that history. Rather, Brathwaite and Evaristo adopt poetic forms that can bring those fragments into connection with each other in a manner that, first, bears witness creatively to the "broken worlds" of their ancestors and, second, enlivens the legacies of slavery and colonization in the present. Elizabeth M. DeLoughrey unpacks the way in which tidalectics offers a counter-colonial revisioning not only of time but also of space when she writes:

In contradistinction to western models of passive and empty space such as terra and aqua nullius, which were used to justify territorial expansion [...] tidalectics [...] foreground[s]

altern/native models of reckoning space and time that require an active and participatory engagement with the island sea-scape. [...] Attention to movement offers a paradigm of rooted routes, of a mobile, flexible, and voyaging subject who is not physically or culturally circumscribed by the terrestrial boundaries of island space. (2007: 3)

A tidalectic temporality, then, extends to Evaristo's depiction of space: rather than privileging landmasses that can become synonymous with essentialized notions of national and cultural identity (as we see in Naipaul), Evaristo looks to the fluidity of seascapes that allows for the crossing and recrossing of national boundaries. In Lara's family history, the Atlantic Ocean is a site of rupture: her ancestors were stolen from Yorubaland (modern-day Nigeria) and taken to South America, and her grandfather returns to Nigeria, recrossing the ocean and causing a split with his own Brazilian family. But this seascape is also reclaimed by Lara from her position in contemporary, post-imperial Britain as it becomes a site of rooted routes that enables her to forge connections between and enliven the fragments of that ruptured history.

One instance of this occurs when Lara's Nigerian grandmother dies. Lara is still an adolescent growing up in London at this point and has never travelled to Nigeria to meet her paternal grandmother. And yet, we are told that, "When Nana died the sea began to surge, | rushed into my ears at night [...] | words formed by waves and wind, whooshing" (Evaristo, 2009: 154). With this, a "dark-skinned" figure "materialised" in Lara's bedroom and almost instantly "faded out into nothingness" leaving only faint words on the wind, "'Bring him home', it sang, 'Bring him home'" (154). It is on the waves and the sea's wind, then, that Lara imagines a spiritual connection with her paternal grandmother. Pointedly, however, her grandmother appears and retreats like a tidal wave, replicating Brathwaite's evocation of the transitory nature of the transatlantic tides that bring "grain by gentle grain out of its granary, coast upon coast, & then in one long sweep of light or night, take all away again" (1994: 653). Lara's sensory and elusive encounter, along with her cousin Beatrice's revelation, is enough to inspire her journeys to Nigeria and Brazil to reconstruct the familial stories that Taiwo has tried to erase. By the novel's close, she has crossed continents and oceans and is able to accommodate what Brathwaite calls the "creative chaos" of her future.

In the final scene of the novel, after Lara has learnt about the parts of her family history that have previously been silenced, she recounts her visit to Manaus, situated on the banks of the Brazilian Amazon, in language that draws on the baptismal qualities of water. As a "rainstorm hammers Manaus, rivering streets", Lara emerges onto the quay-side "wobbly", as if walking for the first time, her "heart replete with time and hope" (Evaristo, 2009: 188). Having made her way to "the waterfall at Cachoera do Taruma", she strips naked to be "revitalised by icy cascades" (188). The rainstorm and the waterfall symbolize Lara's reawakening whereby she is reborn and "baptised, resolved to paint slavery out of me, | the Daddy People onto canvas with colour-rich strokes" (188). She contemplates Britain, "the 'Great' Tippexed out of it, | tiny amid massive floating continents, the African one || an embryo within me" (188). Here, Europe, the Americas, and Africa are not stable landmasses that denote the fixed geographical and ontological poles of order and chaos, or civilization and savagery. Rather, the novel ends with Lara imagining herself as both child and mother simultaneously and appreciating her family history

in a way that resists the neat resolution of identity formation but still does not exclude her from either Britain or from her ancestral homelands.

We have seen, then, how Evaristo's revised Bildungsroman situates Lara within the traumatic history of her father's ancestry in Nigeria and Brazil. Her mother's side, however, connects her to a history of English expansion and domination in Ireland. Lara's maternal great-great-grandmother, Emma, experiences the brutalities of British colonialism during the Famine of the 1840s, after which Benjamin Disraeli pronounced, "[The Irish] hate our order, our civilisation" (1836: 145). Since the Famine "ravaged the island | for four murderous years" (Evaristo, 2009: 31), Emma migrates to England to raise her daughter Mary Jane, Lara's great-grandmother who is regarded by the English as a "half-breed" (42). It is on this Irish colonial history that I will finish, with a consideration of how an aesthetics of disorder operates in Eavan Boland's poetry.

Brutal roots: The poetry of Eavan Boland

Boland confronts the overlapping histories of transatlantic slavery and colonialism in Ireland, which have been disregarded by a triumphant narrative of colonial order, in her poem "In Which the Ancient History I Learn Is Not My Own" (1994). Recalling a History lesson in 1952, the speaker describes a map of the British Empire which shows the colonies in red, described as "the stain of absolute possession" (Boland, 2013: 133). Although the History teacher asserts: "The Roman Empire was | the greatest Empire | ever known — | until our time of course" (134), the speaker offers an ironic distance from this patriotic pronouncement by describing the colours on the map as having been "faded out" (133): much of the Empire was still under British control by 1952 but the successful independence struggles of Ireland, India, Pakistan, Myanmar, and Sri Lanka signalled its decline. The map hangs on the wall from a "wooden batten on | a triangle of knotted cotton" (133), providing an allusion to both the authoritarianism used to quell independence movements and the triangular slave trade that relied on the exploitation of racialized labour for the production of cotton. These features hold the map in its prominent place on the classroom wall but simultaneously exist on the margins, while the map itself is made from a "shiny" (133) linen suggestive of the whitewashed sheen that keeps British society insulated from its own brutal colonial past. Evoking the traumatic geographical and cultural fragmentation that characterizes colonized regions but is elided by dominant accounts of the Empire, the map is described as having become "cracked in places" with the cracks "darkened by grime" (133). The speaker's attention is drawn specifically to Ireland, which "was far away | and farther away | every year" (133). The "waters | of the Irish sea" take on a symbolic resonance as the "cross-grained blue green | had drained away | to the pale gaze | of a doll's china eyes — | a stare without recognition or memory" (133). The imagery of water, in this instance, enunciates a similar kind of cultural dislocation to that experienced by Singh in *The Mimic Men*. Yet, unlike Naipaul, Boland's writing enacts a performative re-engagement with her formerly colonized homeland. Having spent much of her childhood in England, she is only "nearly" (133) English and seeks to reclaim her Irishness by studying and "trac[ing] over" (134) the cold, impersonal details of the map.

A reclamation of Boland's Irishness is inflected by her position as a female poet writing within a poetic tradition that has presented women as either muses or passive

participants in Irish society and culture. In turning to Boland, then, it is possible to extend the analysis of Naipaul and Evaristo to include a consideration of the ways in which decolonial nationalism can itself simplify and silence marginalized figures based on gendered notions of social order. When commenting on the impetus behind her work, Boland asserts that her poetry enacts “the strange scenario of what happens to a tradition when previously mute images within it come to awkward and vivid life: when the icons return to haunt the icon-makers” (1995a: 485). In *Object Lessons* she affirms that “[a] hundred years ago I might have been a motif in a poem. Now I could have a complex self within my own poem” (1995b: 151). Through her poetry, then, Boland seeks “to ‘repossess’ those portions of history ignored by the Irish canon and to reassess the truth of the national identity” (Hagen and Zelman, 1991: 445). In countering the mythologized feminization of Ireland, Boland’s poetry develops an Irish national consciousness that includes women that do not fit neatly into accounts of the Irish struggle for independence offered by male poets.

This objective is encapsulated in her poem “It’s a Woman’s World” (1982), in which the speaker laments that “as far as history goes | we were never | on the scene of the crime” (Boland, 2013: 47). The speaker draws attention to the gendered divide between the public and private spheres, whereby the grand events of history take place in the world of men, while women are “gristing bread || or getting the recipe | for a good soup” (48). The world of women, then, is located by “the flame | of hearth not history”, meaning that “no page | scores the low music | of our outrage” (48). As Patricia L. Hagen and Thomas W. Zelman remark, Boland’s confrontation with the gendering of historical events foregrounds the way in which “women’s aspirations, sufferings, and unglamorous heroics are rendered invisible by their ordinariness” (1991: 446). Boland confronts this dilemma most forcefully in “Mise Eire” (1987), a poem that seeks to redress the absence of women’s experiences in traditional Irish poetry. The title is Gaelic for “I am Ireland”, an allusion to the 1912 poem of the same name by the republican nationalist Patrick Pearse, who was a leading revolutionary in the Easter Rising of 1916. In Pearse’s poem, Ireland is personified as an old woman in mourning, robbed of her former glory after suffering indignity, harassment, and betrayal at the hands of those who have stolen her lands. In a moment of confrontation with Pearse, Boland’s speaker opens with the declaration, “I won’t go back to it — || my nation displaced | into old dactyls”, before dismissing “the songs | that bandage up the history, | the words | that make a rhythm of the crime || where time is time past. | A palsy of regrets” (2013: 59). The “old dactyls” of traditional Irish poetry and music are presented as having at best simplified and at worst silenced the role of women in Irish colonial and postcolonial society: women are able to feature either as muses or as nationalist symbols, meaning that their lived experiences are elided. Boland suggests that the traumatic violence of the past has been “bandaged” by nationalist songs and poems: the rhythms are not “unruly” as in *Lara* but covered over to make them more easily digestible as part of a romanticized version of history.

In the place of such poetic traditions, Boland searches for a new aesthetic that abandons the notion of the mythologized woman without foregoing the value of Irish nationalism. In doing so, the poem draws on the imagery of trees and water that is evident in both *The Mimic Men* and *Lara*. That enduring image of deep time — the tree — which is destroyed in *The Mimic Men* and which is rebuilt in *Lara*, is alluded to in the line “my

roots are brutal” (Boland, 2013: 59). For the speaker, these roots are based on affiliations of both nation and gender connecting her imaginatively through time to the garrison prostitute, who must perform a “dove-strut” and the “rictus of delight” (59) for male soldiers, and to the immigrant mother leaving her home on board the *Mary Belle* in “the huddling cold, | holding her half-dead baby to her” (60). These figures work counter to the mythologized figures of “Mother-Ireland”, such as the Old Woman of Beare and Cathleen Ni Houlihan, and foreground how the female speaker seeks to bear witness to the real lives of the marginalized and oppressed women of Ireland. At the heart of Boland’s critique here is a distinction between the past and history. The version of history offered predominantly by male nationalists has been over-simplified by mythologized narratives and songs that silence the real experiences and sacrifices of women. The past, on the other hand, is brutal and polyvocal: the repetition of “I am the woman” (59, 60) replaces the singular pronouncement of “I am Ireland” from a mythologized motherland with the voices of the prostitute and the immigrant mother who claim their own space in the tradition of Irish verse.

Water plays a key part towards the end of the poem. In *Lara*, Evaristo adopts the imagery of water to foreground a shared historic rupture that the protagonist can then accommodate in a moment of self-subjectification. For Boland, the water that the figure of the immigrant mother must cross is “dirty” (60) and pitches those on board the ship into dangerous, ice-cold winds. It is suggested that this figure has been exiled from her homeland, and we can infer that this is because she has either had a child out of wedlock, perhaps even as a former prostitute, or has been widowed by the fight for Irish independence. The water in this instance then is ambivalent; it represents a permanent rupture that is experienced as homesickness as well as the possible escape from a society where Irish women are denied their own agency and where female sacrifice is rendered unhistorical. As Andrew Auge has written, “national identity” in Boland’s poetry “is not so much something that one possesses or preserves, but a venture that is collectively undertaken, a journey that moves hopefully, like the exile, away from hatred and toward hospitality” (2004: 144). Crossing the water does not mean falling between the gap of home and host country, as in *The Mimic Men*, but it also does not necessarily represent the kind of rebirth experienced in *Lara*. Rather, the crossing represents a hopeful but ongoing movement towards a possible settlement that allows for the prospect of future generations, such as Evaristo’s Lara Da Costa, to return to and reconnect with their family’s ruptured past.

Conclusion

To conclude, dominant narratives of decolonization are reliant on ideas of British exceptionalism, which serve to insulate British society from the true brutalities of colonialism whilst at the same time disregarding the ethical and political resources of anticolonial resistance. This in turn works to bolster racist myths that support exclusionary conceptions of Britishness being equated with whiteness and help sustain anti-immigrant and xenophobic rhetoric. Mapping the features of non-linearity, polyvocality, and environmental imagery evident in works by Naipaul, Evaristo, and Boland reveals how creative interventions are able to confront and challenge such authoritative narratives of colonial and decolonial order. It also suggests a productive means of further comparative analysis

across twentieth- and twenty-first century prose, poetry, and drama. An aesthetics of disorder, for instance, can assist in examining Samuel Beckett's work within a post-imperial, Irish context, especially in light of his assertion in an interview from 1961, the same year of Atlee's *Empire Into Commonwealth* speech, that "the task of the artist" is to "find a form that accommodates the mess" (Graver and Federman, 1979: 219). It contributes to further understanding Derek Walcott's claim regarding the "bitter memory" of Caribbean history and migration that, "A political philosophy rooted in elation would have to accept belief in [...] the recreation of an entire order, from religion to the simplest rituals. [...] The great poetry of the New World does not pretend such innocence" (2006: 331). And it places Bristol's City Poet Vanessa Kisuule's response to the felling of Colston's statue within a longer tradition, particularly her retort in "Hollow" that, "Victors wish history odourless and static | but history is a sneaky mistress" (2020). An attentiveness to the aesthetics of disorder across such disparate texts does not suggest that Britain's brutal colonial history cannot be narrated or understood, but instead reveals the ways in which understandings of that traumatic past must attend to the difficult truths that cannot be readily subsumed into myths of British exceptionalism. They show how creative responses to empire and decolonization can productively accommodate that difficult disorderliness as a means of forging new literary forms that can bear witness to the silenced narratives of history.

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Notes

1. A group of prominent historians, including David Olusoga, have written an open letter to the Home Office that addresses the inaccurate accounts of colonialism and slavery in the guide and the UK citizenship test. See Siddique (2020).
2. The use of dynamite reminds us also that it took the UK Government many gallons of petrol and huge weighted crates to quite literally burn or sink official records of colonial crimes during Operation Legacy. It is worth noting that details of Operation Legacy only emerged after a group of elderly Kenyans who were imprisoned and tortured during the war of independence in the 1950s sued the British government and won. The case was reported on for *The Guardian* by Ian Cobain and the wider implications are investigated in his 2016 book *The History Thieves: Secrets, Lies, and the Shaping of a Modern Nation*.

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